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Zaventem Heist: the challenge of high value shipments

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ZAVENTEM HEIST: preliminary lessons

by Philip Baum

Having just returned from vacation, readers were going to be subjected to a 'Mr Angry' Lead Editorial, in which I expounded on the way in which the airline industry acts in a way that contributes towards acts of unruly passenger behaviour on board aircraft. Having been subjected to humiliating and ridiculous "that's what the regulations say, Sir" procedures at the airport prior to my return flight and inhuman treatment by the airline at my European transit point, it was only the superlative aircrew who saved the day by the exemplary performance of their duties. Had they had a slightly less savvy passenger on board, they might well have become the unjust victims of an act of air rage actually instigated by their employers and handling agents on the ground. But, as I put finger to keyboard to type out my rant, the phone went as the news broke of the diamond heist at Brussels International Airport...

Detail and confirmed facts as to what actually occurred in Zaventem just before 2000hrs on 18 February are sketchy to say the least. Accordingly, any attempt to attribute blame would be unreasonable. That said, there is every indication that the heist was professionally organised by an intelligent, sophisticated, well organised criminal outfit. It is also highly likely that the incident could further demonstrate the vulnerability of airports to the insider threat.

Eight armed gunmen, dressed to resemble police officers drove two dark vehicles – an Audi saloon and a Mercedes truck each with flashing blue lights - through the perimeter fence and sped up to a Helvetic Airways flight preparing to depart for Zurich. Brandishing their weapons, and in the slickest of operations, they held the crew and the security guard hostage whilst they offloaded 120 packages from the cargo hold which contained approximately \$50 million worth of rough diamonds. The gunmen then made their exit the way they had arrived – through a hole in the fence. The heist was completed in minutes.

Diamond, precious gem, cash and other high value shipments have long been the target of organised crime. The Antwerp Diamond Centre, from where the diamonds had been transported, had fallen victim to such an attack in 2003 when diamonds valued at twice the amount of the Zaventem heist were stolen. As good as the security at the Centre is now, the diamonds still have to leave the premises and whilst most people would be worried about the security en route to the airport, the gang seemed to identify the loading process, albeit airside at an international airport, as the Achilles Heel of the operation.

Cargo heists are not uncommon. New York's JFK and Kuala Lumpur International Airport are two airports which have fallen victim in the past year. However, most heists are carried out at cargo warehouses rather than on the ramp. But the Zaventem attack does bear some resemblance to an attack at Schiphol in Amsterdam in 2005 in which men, wearing KLM uniforms and driving a stolen KLM truck,

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managed to get away with a truck load of diamonds bound for Antwerp. Some reports indicate that the heist was valued at \$118 million.

The latest heist required pinpoint timing, almost impossible to achieve without inside accomplices or, at the very least, inside information. That would hardly be difficult to obtain given the raft of reports relating to airside criminal activity – luggage theft, pilferage, human trafficking, narco-trafficking – that is taking place at most of the world's major gateways. Where there are large numbers of jobs in which staff turnover rates are high and for which the financial remunerations are low, there will be plenty of people prepared to engage in illegal activities to supplement their incomes. And yet we spend, spend, spend on ways of screening passengers in ever more invasive ways whilst turning a blind eye to some of the fundamental fallibilities of our aviation system.

As I stated in my column last October, which was subtitled 'Time to Focus on Airport Perimeter Security' in light of the disturbing number of incidents in which people had stowed away in wheel wells, or even on board aircraft, we tend to overlook the breaches of our outer cordons which take place on a daily basis.

If Zaventem teaches us anything, aside from the need to better know who we are trusting to work in sterile zones, it is that when security measures are compromised, and they will be, the speed at which we respond to that failure is the most important factor. It is not difficult to gain airside access with a firearm. In airports where security guards are unarmed, if an armed individual instructs them to open the gate, they would be well advised to do so! The fact that the gunman gains airside access would not be a failure of security in itself, but a failure to sound the alarm thereafter would be.

So, OK, eight armed gunmen made it in through the fence at Zaventem... but, in this day and age of intelligent CCTV and sophisticated perimeter intrusion detection systems, how on earth did they make it out again before the authorities were able to react? ■

